Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered: The Representation of Children in Victorian Ghost Stories

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Abstract

The Victorian period saw the emergence of the ghost story as a popular genre. Some of these stories feature children which, I will argue, intensify the horror effect on the reader. Drawing on cultural notions of childhood representation, ghost stories present them in multiple ways to intensify the horror effect on the reader. Categorising the genre as a deliberately ambiguous one and identifying tensions and contradictions in how childhood was literarily represented, this paper discusses the role of children in ten Victorian ghost stories.

Because children were paradoxically seen as charming and vulnerable, as well as indecipherable and mischievous, their representation oscillates between that of victims to cruel spectres and that of disturbing and threatening to adults. In the stories where they are shown in better light, the narratives appeal to our compassion and make us fear that the child will unjustly bear the aftermath of some wrong deed with which they are not involved, which makes us question who embodies the real horror. By contrast, in the stories where they appear as spectres or are depicted with ghostly attributes, they tackle parental anxieties and expose some issues which adult characters were either unaware of or dared not admit.

Keywords: Victorian Literature, Ghost stories, Children, Spectrality, Gothic, Popular Fiction

0. Introduction

0.1. Contextualization and Aim of the Research

The Victorian period saw the emergence of short fiction as a popular literary genre for the increasingly literate middle classes. Many great Victorian novelists published short fiction in journals or quarterly editions, and several were the authors who earned themselves a reputation for writing short stories. Most studies in Victorian literature focus on the great novels of the period, which also became more popular as a genre, but they usually eclipse the importance of authors who were well-known and broadly read at the time and who are nowadays overlooked in literature syllabi despite their popularity in the past. We must bear in mind that short fiction, and Gothic fiction in particular, was the response to an increasing demand for literature with the purpose of entertaining.

The Ghost Story was perhaps the most developed genre within short fiction and virtually all Victorian writers contributed, with varying degrees of success and recurrence, to this tradition. In fact, Victorians may well have shaped our understanding of spectres and the supernatural to this day. Even though it seems that Victorians inherited the Ghost story from the late-eighteenth century, they perfected these stories by adding certain elements from their period. In fact, Victorians felt a strange fascination and interest for the supernatural. In an era of incredibly rapid technological and scientific progress, accounts of supernatural phenomena coexisted with objective science and the religious discourse of faith and the soul. This was especially recognisable in literature, where stories of hauntings are treated and investigated with scientific rigour.

The period's fascination with the supernatural has always intrigued me and, as a fond reader of horror stories, I have always wanted to learn more about the narrative mechanisms which convey fear to the reader. During my seminars on "The Living and

the Dead in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture" at the University of Leicester, my peers and I already noticed that some of the children appearing in ghost stories made the narratives even more frightening. This made me realise that this aspect deserved deeper discussion. Furthermore, the present study focuses on childhood, which has rarely been connected to the genre. Typically, it is ghosts who attract critical attention and discussions are usually centred on what they embody and what their motivation is, but I centre my discussion around children and the living.

My research revolves around the question of why children are significant to these narratives and how they are represented in regard to the supernatural. I believe that ghost stories exploit the figure of children to intensify the horror effect on the reader. In order to verify my thesis, I have reviewed the specialised literature and selected 10 short stories which I used as primary texts, all of which are listed in the bibliography. I have, then, articulated my ideas in this paper with the aim of assessing how children contribute to the reading experience as a plot device in Victorian ghost stories. The first part of my research analyses the cultural constructs of ghosts and children for the Victorian society and finds textual evidence of these in the selected texts. The second and final section offers a discussion around the way children are represented and how they contribute to the narrative. As will be seen, they can have both the role of victims and of victimisers, so the stories are discussed in different subsections and classified accordingly.

0.2. Literature Review

The critical community has produced an enormous body of research around supernatural phenomena in Victorian Literature and around ghost stories in particular. Many critics have observed that "ghost stories were something at which Victorians excelled. They were as typically part of the cultural and literary fabric of the age as

imperial confidence or the novel of social realism" (Cox & Gilbert, x). It was certainly a very prolific genre which, as suggested by Branca (203), was not originally meant to be associated with Gothic, since this was traditionally a genre that belonged to the literate lower classes. Although Victorian Gothic indeed remained a form of popular fiction and had an entertaining purpose, the upper classes also enjoyed reading stories that, "with bedtime reading a growing pastime in an increasingly literate Britain, […] transformed the bedroom from the traditional place of safety and repose into a site of unrest and horror" (Freeman, 95). These narratives, as well as some paranormal phenomena, appealed to both the working classes and the upper-class members like Queen Victoria herself (Moran, 89).

Critics have established a chronology of the genre, which as many suggest, has its origins in the late eighteenth-century Gothic (Briefel, 508; Branca, 202-3; Freeman, 93). However, Victorian authors perfected the ghost story and gave it a distinct character. Drabble writes that "where early Gothic fiction had been risibly unconcerned with either historical detail or present realities, the best Victorian writers of ghost stories usually set supernatural incidents in solid everyday settings, [...] which made such violations of normality all the more convincing" (404).

The first ghosts of the Victorian period made timid appearances in novels like Dickens's *Pickwick's Papers* or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and, very importantly, in the early short fiction of J. S. Le Fanu, who is considered a canonical author of ghost stories. However, Cox & Gilbert (xi) argue that it was not until the 1850's that the Victorian ghost story achieved a solid literary status. In the 1860's, Victorian ghosts featured in what critics have called "sensation fiction, which [...] drew from the gothic to describe the earthly terrors prowling in English country houses or in city streets" (Briefel, 509). However, these stories and Gothic conventions, became stale by the late

1880's. Despite parodies made of Victorian ghosts – such as Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost", the genre experienced a revival in the 1890's. Ghosts, alongside other spectres and monsters, became embodiments of the *fin de siècle* fears, desires and anxieties such as "Darwinism, Imperialism, degeneration, non-normative sexualities and the rise of the New Woman" (Briefel, 511).

As a matter of fact, literary ghosts were usually associated with social issues. Cox & Gilbert (xv), Bann (664) and Branca (210), for instance, argue that the increasing popularity of the Spiritualist movement and Mesmerism in the 1840's also contributed to the development of the Victorian ghost story. The religious society of the period saw these doctrines as earthly rather than divine and gave a new possibility for the dead to revisit the world of the living, thus allowing a communication between past and present that was meant to achieve something. From a gender perspective, the critical tradition has also frequently linked ghost stories to "the horror and pain lurking in ordinary female experience" (Auerbach, 281). In fact, writers of popular Gothic tales were not unfrequently women.

A recent approach to spectral revenants is what critics like Smajic have defined as the trope of vision. As he puts it, "the ghost story's complex negotiations between faith and doubt in the epistemological value of sight are the result of an emerging crisis in early nineteenth-century discourse on vision" (1109-10). Seeing things which may or may not be real is part of an ontological discussion in a period where Spiritualism and religion coexist naturally alongside scientific observation and technological progress. This new approach emphasises the ambivalence of ghost stories, which subvert realist constraints on one hand while they approach supernatural phenomena with scientific rigour on the other.

Despite this Victorian fascination for supernatural phenomena and the surprisingly high number of ghost stories that have been compiled, spectres themselves – and their actions – "attract little critical attention: either the critics use ghosts as a fulcrum for other issues or individual ghosts disappear in sonorous generalisations" (Auerbach, 278). It seems that some research still needs to be conducted to fully understand how ghosts affect their narratives. Observing what happens when a revenant appears and how it conditions the unfolding of the narrative is as important as considering what issues lie behind their apparition.

The other area that this paper explores is the representation of children. Research is also quite extensive in this topic, which should not be surprising since great novelists, such as Charles Dickens, frequently presented a child as the main narrative focus. Moran (115) also notes that the Victorian society started changing the social value of children and their views on childhood. This implied that "the emergence of childhood as a protected time and space to be shared by all children, therefore, resulted in the transformation of the child from an economically useful member of a household to an economically worthless but emotionally priceless figure in society" (Flegel, 13). Evidence of this can be found in the Factory Act (1844), which limited the number of working hours for children. Flegel's monograph, though focusing only on abused children, illustrates that Victorians increasingly saw them as victims of a harsh industrial system. That is why, as Moran (116) argues, a lot of efforts were made to raise children within the morale of the Victorian society and several books and magazines with educational purposes were published. Yet, from a literary perspective, abuse was not the only thing that haunted Victorian children.

However, research seems to be scarce around how children were represented in Victorian Gothic. A departing point can be found in the observation that "horror literature

[...] constructs the figure of the child through a set of binary oppositions: innocence and corruption, frightened and frightening, victim and predator, haunted and haunting" (Buckley, 233). Most of the times, children in ghost stories are characterised by a certain ambiguity around which of the afore-mentioned qualities they represent. Furthermore, the figure of the child is "defined and established as the adult's binary opposite and is positioned as a pivotal cultural other" (Balanzategui, 10). Because the child in literature is constructed through the eyes of the adult, there is a limit as to how accurate their representation can be. Buckley notes that "the construction of the child in horror is both paradoxical and pathological" (236). The paradox lies in the fact that the adult writer is portraying the child as an opposite to themselves even though they were once a child. There is something in the child that is recognisable in the adult. This has given rise to many Freudian interpretations of how children are represented in horror as being the opposite of adults. Balanzategui and Buckley identify the children as uncanny, a characteristic which, I will argue, plays an important role in the reading of Victorian ghost stories.

Delving into the role of children and their representation in Victorian ghost stories will offer new insights on how we should approach these narratives because we are "shift[ing] our attention from the ghost to the ghost-seer, from the spectral object of ghost-seeing to its human subject" (Smajic, 1108). By doing this, we can focus our attention on two important issues: how the spectre is affecting the narrative and how they use children to fulfil their purpose. This new approach gains significance because ghosts are portrayed as "essentially restricted figures – catalysts to another's action rather than the agents of their own" (Bann, 663). Since Victorian ghosts rely on the living to achieve something, I believe it is interesting to understand why they choose to haunt children to act on behalf of them. This adds another layer of psychological dimension to spectres, which, as Branca

argues, “became the subject of narratives rather than simple vehicles for plot development” (202). Ghosts, therefore, have a psychological element that allow us to see them as characters with a purpose in the narrative.

After considering how previous literature has approached the topic, I believe that the many ways in which children are represented in connection to the supernatural manifest that Victorian ghost stories exploit the figure of children to intensify the horror effect on the reader. Understanding how spectres were literarily constructed enables us to see that Victorian ghosts are treated as characters with volition and that they have an overarching story that connects the present and the living with the past and the dead. Children, by contrast, are culturally effective plot devices that contribute to the “pleasurable shudder” (Michael Sadleir, quoted in Cox & Gilbert, ix) which all ghost story readers seek.

1. Cultural Tropes in Victorian England

Before engaging on a discussion around children representation in Victorian ghost stories, one must explore the cultural aspects that shaped the genre and the defining traits of childhood in the period. These formal observations greatly contribute to a better grasping of the culture that produced this body of fiction and how their ideas regarding gothic elements and childhood developed in literature. Therefore, the following chapter is devoted to delving deeply into the formal aspects of the ghost stories which I am discussing and examining how they portray childhood within a Victorian context.

1.1. Gothic and Ghost Stories

'What a dreary night! [...] I wish uncle would come and tell us a story'
(MacDonald, 130)

Reading became an increasingly popular activity in Victorian England due to factors such as the broader and easier access to the arts and education by the middle classes (Moran, 13). Many families would gather by the fire in the evening and have a family member read something aloud. Thus, a considerable body of Victorian fiction – and of ghost stories in particular – was written to be read to an audience. This setting was reproduced in the stories themselves, as illustrated by the following passage: "The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as in a Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be" (James, 148). This evidences that, by the turn of the century, ghost stories had not only acquired an oral dimension that afforded them a folkloric-like status, but also that they constituted a distinct genre with its own particularities. Ghost stories were just as much a part of society as the unprecedented inventions and discoveries that were revolutionising and modernising England.

This raises a question as to what extent ghost stories were credible. Although they clearly belonged to the realm of fiction, these stories drew inspiration form everyday settings. The dominating literary trend at the time was that of Realism and stories demanded little suspension of disbelief, so one should wonder if ghosts were considered part of the real world too. Did Victorians really believe that revenge-seeking spectres lived among them? This question is very difficult to answer because the evidence from the texts is normally inconclusive and unreliable. In "To Let", two characters are wondering why the house they have acquired should be so affordable despite its luxuries and good condition when one of them utters that "'Perhaps it has a ghost' I suggested facetiously; and at such an absurd idea we both went into peals of laughter" (Croker, 350).

Paradoxically, these characters think of ghosts as an "absurd idea" while being the ones who tell us about the ghost-sighting. This arises a sense of sympathy within the readers because the narrator is putting herself at the same level of scepticism about the existence of ghosts as the readers. She acknowledges her prior bias to make her story more credible, since she would never write a story that she herself did not believe to have happened. However, it is part of the fictional mechanisms to make the narrative appear truthful that the narrator of a ghost story believes in spectral manifestations, at least, after they have witnessed one.

This scepticism contrasts with another character's assertions that "'I have lived where there were such things seen"(Clifford House, 227). It must be noted, however, that these declarations usually come from working-class characters and they are readily dismissed on the grounds that their accounts are subject to gossiping and superstition and, therefore, unrealistic. Yet the idea of vengeful ghosts lurking in every house or at the countryside at night was probably not utterly far-fetched to the Victorians. The dominant Evangelical doctrine taught them that there is a sentient soul in every human being which will reunite with God in afterlife. This dogma is expressed by Uncle Cornelius as follows:

> It matters very little whether we believe in ghosts, as you say, or not, provided we believe that we are ghosts – that within this body, which so many people are ready to consider their own very selves, there lies a ghostly embryo, at least, which has an inner side to it God only can see, [...] and which will soon have to know whether or not it can appear to those whom it has left behind, and thus solve the question of ghosts for itself,. (MacDonald, 134)

However, the tone of his narration is extremely ambiguous and, wise though he appears to be, Uncle Cornelius does not have a firm opinion on whether ghosts exist. Children struggle to understand his story, since they expect a clear narrative. Yet neither the existence of the ghost nor the spectre's involvement in the story are objectively proved to be real.

From a critical perspective, the issue as to whether revenants constitute a breach to Realist norms is also undetermined since "the relationship between ghosts and realism is more complex than one of simple opposition, then; what looks like opposition is better understood as dialectical engagement" (Hay, 59). Spectres are represented in a way which does not alienate them completely from the modern setting where they appear but rather questions our understanding of the physical space. Their appearance forces readers to find an answer as to why they are there in the first place and, once it has been given – or hinted at –, our conception of the place changes. What initially seemed a "charming place" (Croker, 348) instils, by the end of the story, "a mortal abhorrence" (359) in the characters because of the ugly past it hides. Ghosts show the reader what is hiding behind a delightful yet deceitful appearance.

The complexity of Victorian ghost stories transcends into the realm of epistemology. Branca proposes that the spectres of Victorian fiction feature the characteristic of the trope she calls the "un-ghost", referring with this term to any entity that manifests without "conclusively show[ing] to be the spirit of the dead person it is assumed to be" (202). Although there might be certain traits that enable us to draw parallelisms between the spectre and a given character, the identity of the ghost is not explicitly confirmed by the narrative, which leaves the reader to decide whether the evidence presented is enough to determine who this entity used to be. Furthermore, the reliability of spectral sightings is also obscured by the fact that the ghost-seer's psychological state is not unfrequently that of alteration or reduced consciousness. To illustrate this, I have selected the following passage, which corresponds to the moment where the narrator first sees a ghostly apparition:

> [In] this dream, nightmare, or infernal illusion – which you please – [...] I saw, or I thought I saw, with the most abominable distinctness, although at the time in profound darkness, every article of furniture and accidental arrangement of the chamber in which I lay. This, as you know, is incidental to ordinary nightmare. [...]

> Well, while in this clairvoyant condition, [...] my attention invariably became, I know not why, fixed up on the windows opposite the foot of my bed. (LeFanu, 21)

The narrator is undecided as to whether he is awake or sleeping and lets the reader decide which it was. The sighting is not given full authenticity since the language used to describe it mixes opposing concepts (*darkness* and *distinctness*) and belongs to the world of dreams and illusions. The text does not clarify either whether the narrator was in full consciousness or whether his memory of this sighting was really an experience he had (*I saw, or I thought I saw*). For all we know, his vision could be a dream or a hallucination. The reader must decide whether they trust the narrator's "clairvoyant condition" and believe the account as it has been given. As Smajic notes, in the Victorian period, the value of vision and sightings was an "ontologically contested issue" (1110). Ghost stories excelled at questioning where the boundary is – if there is one at all – between objective and subjective reality, "between optical fact and optical illusion" (1110). Believing in the account of someone else's sighting implied automatically accepting their possible vision bias. This was something which ghost-story writers exploited abundantly and that other forms of Realist literature could not so effectively expose. This also relates to the association of Gothic elements with deception, fakes, and counterfeits (Briefel, 516).

In fact, reliability seems to be a key element for these narratives. Many ghost story narrators insist on giving a real, truthful account of the events. An example of this can be seen in the pantomime-like setting of the prologue to "The Turn of the Screw", where Douglas contends that he will not tell the story of the Governess himself because he prefers to read it from her manuscript. Interestingly, the anonymous narrator reproduces this effort to give an uncontestably reliable account of the story by saying that "this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is what I shall presently give" (James, 151). It is interesting that such stories, which deliberately confront reality with the supernatural and which are riddled with ambiguity, put so much effort into

convincing the reader of their authenticity. This has been read as an attempt to "give readers a way to approach the narrated content as truthful, while at the same time insisting that knowledge about ghosts or the supernatural is impossible" (Hay, 82) Therefore, the reliability of the narrative is not compromised by ghost themselves, but by the knowledge we try to get from it. As I mentioned before, these narratives emphasize that, even if extreme accuracy is put in the description of events, what the reader will trust and what associations they will make is ultimately their decision. Only the ways in which readers try to make sense of the stories compromise the authenticity of facts, since it is their ambition for knowing something which most likely escapes our understanding that forces them to interpret beyond what is said. This is highly relevant since, as I will argue later, ghost stories are deliberately inconclusive and are interested in suggesting ideas rather than in asserting facts.

A spectral entity acts as a bridge between a story from the past which has not been witnessed by the narrator and the events which, in contrast, have been experienced by the narrative voice. The physical space where the apparition takes place becomes relevant because it is usually the same where the past events took place. As the literature postulates (Freeman, 93; Drabble, 404), Victorian ghost-story writers deliberately set ghostly apparitions in convincing, contemporary, and familiar settings. This contributed to one of the best-known tropes in Gothic fiction: the haunted house. Most of the revenants analysed in this paper appear in a house, something which creates a double effect on the reader. On the one hand, the ghost appears to be trapped in the dwelling where something terrible happened while they were alive. In a way, this emphasizes that their story never went past the walls of the house, an idea that I will later develop further. On the other hand, the horror effect is intensified because the apparition threatens the safety that Victorians saw in their homes. This is what Hay calls the "defetishization of a

commodity" (83). Ghosts can turn a house – or any object or physical space – into a source of dread and discomfort for the haunted characters. This constitutes the basis of their agency in the stories. As part of the supernatural, they alter our perception of the settings which we usually associate with comfort and safety and make others appreciate what is unnatural and unsettling in our every-day environment.

The bond between ghosts and unresolved past events could range from "familial secrets" (Branca, 203) to "a murder to be revealed or a warning to be given" (Drabble, 404). Interestingly, "The Botathen Ghost" is a story which plays with the possibility that these warnings are ignored. The text reproduces a diary entry dating from the 17th Century which reads: "How sorely must the infidels and heretics of this generation be dismayed when they know that this Black Death, which is now swallowing its thousands in the streets of the great city, was foretold six months agone [...] by a visible and suppliant ghost" (Hawker, 73). Although the ghost is clearly linked to the tragedy of the Black Death, I would argue that the story hints that the tragedy lies in the fact that no one paid attention to the child nor the ghost because they were seen as doubtful sources of information. However, this is an odd story in both that it was inspired in the past and that the spectre acted prophetically. Most Victorian revenants haunted the living to unveil instances of inter-generational cruelty or the contemporary horrors lurking in apparently respectable houses. In fact, "the horror of the ghost story, the horror of the ghost that comes back, is the idea that this history has not been eliminated but only repressed" (Hay, 83) Recovering the discussion around the trope of the haunted house, the domestic space emphasizes that these horrific stories have been enclosed quite literally by the walls of the house and that the truth may not have come to light despite the rumours that might surround the spectral apparition.

Precisely because ghost stories feature this important emphasis on the past, the genre has been compared to detective fiction. However, the characteristics of the narrative discourse differ greatly between one genre and the other. While the tone is resolute and conclusive in detective fiction, it is ambiguous and inconclusive in ghost stories. This can be seen in the closing of "Uncle Cornelius His Story" where one of the children that have been patiently listening to the story asks "Do you think the ghost had anything to do with it, uncle?" to receive as an answer a confusing "How should I know, my dear? Possibly" (MacDonald, 149). This is a very frustrating ending for the reader since it questions whether the story of the ghost was of any use at all. Uncle Cornelius' denying the involvement of the ghost in the story spoils the expectations that the reader has formed while learning about his vision.

Other stories, however, exploit the narrative gaps and inconclusiveness to intensify the thrill of the encounter with the supernatural. This is the case of Kipling's "They" and James' "The Turn of the Screw". In both cases, the narrative gaps occur because the narrators are describing an unspeakable horror. In Kipling's story, this takes the form of the secret understanding of the blind woman's condition: "Then I knew. And it was as though I had known from the first day when I looked across the lawn at the high window. [...] The woman turned to me in silence, and I felt that she knew" (Kipling, 177). At first, it is difficult to grasp what the realisation has been. They both know what it is, but no one dares to explicitly mention that all the children in the house are ghosts and they came to her because she had never had a child. In James' story, there are many more instances in which the story is not explicitly told. On one occasion, the Governess does not fail to note that, after Mrs. Grose had – reluctantly – told her what had happened between the kids and Quint and Miss Jessel, "there was a word Mrs. Grose had kept back. I was sure, moreover, by morning, that this was not from a failure of frankness, but

because on every side there were fears" (James, 181). The reader is left with an untold detail which creates a narrative gap. Since characters are uncomfortable discussing that situation, they prefer not to mention it explicitly. Although we can read some details as clues to reach a conclusion, the precise nature and the extent of the horror of the story are intentionally left undetermined and the reader is free to fill in the narrative gap with whatever psychological horrors spring to their mind.

Victorian ghosts developed a psychological complexity that remains cryptic to characters and the reader alike. As Bann puts it, "[ghosts] were as varied and psychologically complex as they had been in life, their ability to act within a physical sphere evidence of both their individuality and their liberation from the restrictions of mortality" (673). Some ghosts seek revenge while others try to have their story known to the world. Some apparitions are benevolent, and some others are malignant. Their different behaviours prove that they have different motivations and that there is a variety of reasons as to why they did not leave the world of the living upon their death. Their capacity to feel and interact with the living, as Branca (210) explains, implied that they could be evil and not only capable of terrorizing others, but of killing or driving them mad as well.

As it has been seen, the ghost-story tradition adds more layers of meaning to what seems dull, safe, and ordinary. Despite an obsession to present their narratives as faithful accounts of events, the genre is characterised by its uncertainty. Ghosts question whether we can trust our sight and challenge our perception of physical spaces. Spectral apparitions are linked to a repressed past story. Since the narratives are riddled with hidden traces of immorality or even cruelty which are not usually made explicit, the reader's imagination tries to fill in the narrative gaps with whichever explanation offers the most haunting and unsettling scenario. Furthermore, there is a psychological reality

to ghosts that cannot be ignored. They are able to interact with the living and have the capacity to feel. This prompts different spectral behaviours, which prevents the reader from guessing what to expect. Supernatural phenomena, therefore, teach us that there are some things which we cannot fully understand, even though we are always allowed to try.

1.2. Children in Victorian Literature and Culture

> 'What nonsense you do talk Mr Parks – not fit for children to listen to!'
> (M.R. James, 26)

Children appear in Ghost Stories in multiple narrative levels. In "Uncle Cornelius His Story", they are mere listeners of the story, who are craving to know all there is to learn about ghosts. Their presence can be almost anecdotal, like in "An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street", where the child is only mentioned by dint of an object linked to the spectre described in the story. Likewise, they appear marginally in "To Let" and "The Story of Clifford House", where they mainly embody parental anxieties and remind us that respectable Victorian parents wanted the best for their children. In "The Botathen Ghost", "The Open Door" and "The Old Nurse's Story", the children are the first victims of a haunting. The two latter stories, alongside "Lost Hearts" and "They", feature spectres of children, all of which have different purposes and behaviours in their narratives. In other stories, like James' "The Turn of the Screw" children's role in the narrative is surrounded by ambiguity and they oscillate between being victims and behaving like supernatural entities threatening adult characters. However, despite the multiple narrative levels where they appear, it seems uncommon to find them in the role of narrators. Consequently, and to repeat myself, the figure of the child is presented through the eyes of adulthood, which constitutes the basis of Walsh's claims that children are uncanny (189).

As discussed in the Literature Review, Buckley (233) and Balanzategui (10) established that children in literature are built upon a series of contradictions stemming from the fact that they are presented as the adult's other. They embody different characteristics which, like the Gothic genre, paradoxically combine elements of admiration and of fear. These contradictions are best understood as the clash between two opposing understandings of the figure of children:

> The concept that children are adults' moral inferiors, in need of substantial guidance if they are to mature into productive and virtuous citizenship, and the concept that civilisation is corrupt and that children, not yet implicated in its inexorable sullying of humankind, are superior to adults in their innocence, enjoyment of simple pleasures, and willingness to imagine and trust. (Nelson, 311).

This manifests that children representation in literature was the result of Victorian anxieties and views on what humanity was and what it should be like. They saw in children the opportunity to move forward and make the whole of society progress. While they believed that their guidance was needed to raise them into "virtuous citizenship", they also acknowledged that adults were perhaps not the best model to follow. Therefore, fictional children raised awareness about adults' role in education and questioned whether their conduct was exemplary or the one which Victorians desired for their society. Since their view on how virtuous adults were was paradoxical, the cultural construct of children captured this ambivalence.

The selection of texts dealt with shows how fond of children adults were. They are portrayed as a source of fascination and innocence which instils tender feelings in whoever is near them. This can be seen in Gaskell's story when "The hard, sad Miss Furnivall and the cold Mrs Stark looked pleased when she came fluttering in like a bird playing and pranking, hither and thither, with a continual murmur and pretty prattle of gladness" (Gaskell, 9). Children, in fact, seem to make adults become a better version of themselves just by being around them. Kipling's "They" features a blind widow who lives

alone in a big mansion in the middle of nowhere and has never had a child. Her only joy lies in the fact that children "came because I loved them – because I needed them" (177). The spectral children in the story are sensitive to her feelings and pay her company to ease the pain of her loneliness. The narrator confesses timidly that he also has "one or two reasons why I did not altogether hate [children]" (163). However, it is clear from his attitude that he is actually very fond of them and that he has a great interest in getting to know and entertaining them with the car. Additionally, childhood is portrayed as a protected space when he claims that "A man who laughs at a child – unless the child is laughing too – is a heathen" (169). However, this positive effect of admiration and delight that children have on adults is reversed in the "Turn of the Screw", where the Governess confesses that "with this joy of my children what things in the world mattered? [...] I was dazzled by their loveliness" (James, 171). In a narrative produced by a character who has been accused of being neglectful to her children or even paedophilic, the fact that she is "dazzled by their loveliness" makes readers wish that the infants were not so likeable. James manages to turn the charms of children into the main element of horror in the story. The Governess's admiration for the children is a threat to Miles and Flora, since she will either pay too much attention to them or fail to provide them with the care she is expected to offer.

This draws our attention to the fact that Victorians were genuinely concerned about the care that children received. This is visible in "To Let", where the narrator is the aunt of some children whose mother has witnessed two spectres enacting, every evening, their death in the premises. When this is discovered by the aunt, the mother explains that "I have told no end of stories to keep you and the children from harm" (Croker, 358). They agree that they will not tell the children what happens in the house and will keep them out in the evening, even though that means they will be criticised by other

characters, who do not know anything about the ghostly apparitions and find it inadequate that children should stay up so late. The Victorian perception of childhood as a protected space implied that upper-middle-class families strived to have their children's needs covered. As a result, governesses and nurse maids are not infrequent in the texts where children appear. In "The Story of Clifford House", the mother sees her "maternal anxiety changing into fear" when she is awoken by the loud noise of the servants and wonders "What can nurse be thinking of? They will wake the children most certainly, and Georgie was so long in falling asleep – quite feverish, my own boy! I shall really reprove her very plainly" (229). These two episodes portray children's care as one of the domestic duties which female members of the family (and the servants) had to undertake. It must be noted, however, that their perception is that children are fragile and prone to sickness, anguish and fear.

As claimed above, however, children are sometimes incomprehensible to the adult's eye and they seem to be guided by undecipherable principles. From an arguably Freudian perspective, Walsh claims that the child embodies the unconscious and irrational self, which adults have repressed under layers of prohibition, convention, and civilised behaviour which we identify as rationality (183). This means that children constitute a duplicate version of an adult which can act outside the rational realm. This can be particularly appreciated in how they play with appearances when they are hidden from adults, something extremely relevant and – I believe – deliberate in ghost stories. Gaskell's nurse explains that, at not finding the girl in the house, "I thought she might be hiding from me; it was one of her pretty ways" (8) and that they usually played hide-and-seek. When children are nowhere to be found, adults react with fear because they can no longer guarantee their safety and well-being. Deceitful appearances and the idea of being and not being there at the same time is very reminiscent of the ghost story as a genre.

Additionally, this connects to the contested value of sight and vision that Smajic discusses.

Child disappearances are exploited in many ghost stories. In "Lost Hearts", the two missing children whom Mr Abney had invited to live with him anticipate the horrific experiments which he plans to perform on the newly arrived Stephen Eliott. However, it is in "The Turn of the Screw" that disappearances arouse more fears in both readers and characters. After the Governess has seen Quint's ghost, she realises that "Flora's little bed was empty; and on this I caught my breath with all the terror. [...] I noticed an agitation of the window blind, and the child, ducking down, emerged rosily from the other side of it" (James, 199). When Flora reveals her hiding place, she seems to be in control of the situation while the Governess is recovering from her fright and struggling to understand what the child was doing at the window. After interpreting that the girl is lying and, therefore, hiding something away from her, she checks the lawn by herself only to discover Miles allegedly conversing with Quint's spectre. The situation depicts a clueless (and possibly neurotic) Governess with the mission of understanding what the children, who know Bly very well and try to avoid her presence, are plotting alongside the spectres and against her without her permission or knowledge. With this attitude, children are, in a way, reminiscent of the Gothic genre in that they teach adults that some things may escape their control.

This hints at another issue that captures the tense and paradoxical relationship between adults and infants: knowledge. Adults act as mediators between children and their understanding of the world and, thus, regulate how much knowledge they should have. Buckley specifically highlights that the adults' "desire to protect children from knowledge [...] is bound up in the fear that they already *know* (something unspeakable and corrupt)" (236). It could be argued, for instance, that the mother and auntie in

Croker's story do not want the children to witness how the girl committed suicide after her beloved fiancé had fatally fallen from his horse on a stormy night. Their fear is perhaps that children will get confirmation that suicide exists, and that despair can understandably bring people to this extreme. However, children usually end up trying the limits that adults want to impose on them if they find them unfair, unreasonable, or too tight. Yet again this is best brought to effect in "The Turn of the Screw". The Governess restricts knowledge to other characters from the beginning of the story. She does not tell her master anything about Miles' interdict from school or about the ghosts, she does not tell the children what she thinks of their attitude and there are assuredly many details which she hides from the readers of the story. However, the children start treating the Governess differently and, with their new attitude, undermine her restriction of knowledge, reversing the power balance in their favour. Miles threatens her caregiver when he tells her that "either you clear up with my guardian the mystery of this interruption of my studies, or you cease to expect me to lead with you a life that's so unnatural for a boy" (219). We no longer see an innocent boy, as she had initially presented him, but he is revealed to have a certain knowledge and awareness of the "unnatural" life that she expects to lead with him. This "sudden revelation of a consciousness and a plan" (219) takes her by surprise because, whichever way she has been taking care of the children, she never suspected they would deem it unnatural.

Miles and Flora confront the Governess restriction of knowledge with their menacing attitude. Since the narrative is so focalised in the Governess, who has been insisting that there is no trace of evil in this boy, as readers, it strikes us as unexpected and odd that Miles alludes to their relationship as a "queer business of ours" (James, 224). This sudden change of attitude is what Walsh links to an "idea of performance – and consequently of pretence of falsehood" (188). It seems that being naughty and presenting

themselves as a threat to their carer allows them to resist this restriction of knowledge exerted by the Governess. This idea does not escape her attention, since she notes, upon finding Flora after disappearing again, that she "smiled as if her performance had now been complete" (James, 233). Therefore, if the children's behaviour is deliberate, they are not as devoid of knowledge as adults expect them to be and have a certain way of reversing the power balance in their favour, which indeed reinforces their position as the adult's cultural other.

Therefore, the representation of children is built upon two apparently contradictory views on childhood. On the one hand, it is the space of innocence and loveliness. They bring joy to adult characters who are too repressed and constrained by societal laws and rationality to understand them. Besides, they are seen as dependent on the adult's care and as being too frail to survive the cruelty of the world on their own. On the other hand, fictional children are difficult to predict and challenge the adult's position of power with their behaviour. These stories make it evident that their going out of sight may instigate our fear and anxieties and they teach us, just like ghosts do, that there are certain elements which we cannot control. This paradoxical representation of children stems from the fact that Victorians saw in infants the opportunity to pass onto them a paradigm of ideal citizenship and from the fear that theirs was probably not the best example. Even though adults try to impose limits on what they should learn, children can sometimes adopt an attitude of pretence which undermines the adult's authority and confirms the suspicion that children already know about some horrors from which adults want to keep them away.

2. Children Representation in Victorian Ghost Stories

After having explored in depth the cultural tropes that our body of texts is concerned with, I am going to discuss how the presence of children in ghost narratives intensify the horror effect in each story in particular. It is important to bear in mind that, because of the contradictions in the representation of children, there is also a certain ambivalence in their role in these narratives. Sometimes portrayed as the frail targets of a haunting and sometimes as potentially threatening, I will comment on the stories where they are set as victims first and, then, on those where they embody the horrors of the Gothic themselves. Nevertheless, as it will be seen, there is no clear-cut boundary between these categories, and their role will be characterised by ambivalence and ambiguity in certain stories. Therefore, some will be discussed in both sections.

2.1. Haunted Children: Vulnerability and Trauma

> 'Father, there is some one in the park, – some one that has been badly used'
> (Oliphant, 125)

When children are witnesses to a spectral apparition, the shock has some consistent effects throughout all ghost stories analysed. Ghost-seeing is described as a traumatic experience that has physical and psychological consequences for the subject that experiences it. "The Botathen Ghost" features a child who, "whereas he had been from childhood a blithe and merry boy, [...] he had suddenly, and of late, become morose and silent – nay, even austere and stern – dwelling apart, always solemn, often in tears" (Hawker, 68). The contact with the ghost changes the mood of the child and erodes one of the defining characteristics of the fictional child: that of filling adults with joy. Indeed, ghost-seeing emphasizes children's frailty and increases parental anxieties, thus affecting both the child and the parents. Interestingly, ghost seeing is dealt with as a medical

condition. Roland's mother immediately puts him to bed and calls for a doctor as soon as she learns that her child has had a supernatural experience, because "of course, [it] was the only thing to do" (Oliphant, 122). The father is especially worried and admits that "my blood got a sort of chill in my veins at the idea that Roland should be a ghost-seer; for that generally means a hysterical temperament and a weak health, and all that men most hate and fear for their children" (Oliphant, 127). In both stories discussed here, the depiction of the child is one of vulnerability and the ghost-seeing is seen as a threat to the child's mental and physical condition which calls for professional and devoted care. Another interesting similarity between these stories is that the children are reluctant to disclose that they have had contact with a ghost. This is probably because they know adults very well and expected them not to believe their accounts and just treat them as a symptom of illness.

Even though ghosts are seen as a potential threat to the children, some stories present spectres which have no predatory intentions on their victims. In fact, they may be warning them about some other danger which characters cannot see. The woman haunting the boy in Hawker's story, for instance, wants to warn people about the outbreak of Black Death. In "Lost Hearts", the soon-to-be twelve-year-old Stephen is haunted by the spectres of two children who had been adopted by his uncle previously and who went missing around the same time of the year as the events of the story. Their intention is to warn the child about his uncle's intentions and to wreak revenge on what he did to them. Instead of portraying the conventional spectre that preys on the living energy of the child, this story highlights that the predator in the story is none other than the uncle. Our perception of what is harmful to the child shifts from the dead to the living, from the ghost to the adult. This makes the threat more palpable and intensifies the horror effect of the

story, since what was originally perceived as a token of Mr Abney's goodness is now revealed to be selfish and grotesque.

In fact, many ghost stories raise our awareness about the horrors we cannot see and the people who, despite their respectability, are harmful to others. This is the case of Lord Furnivall, who in Gaskell's story believed that "his daughter had disgraced herself" in marrying his musician secretly and "had turned her out of doors – her, and her child – and [told his servants] that if ever they gave her help – or food – or shelter – he prayed that they might never enter Heaven" (15). As readers, we cannot reasonably discern whether he was crueller in turning his own daughter out in the cold or in hitting his granddaughter and letting her die, a baby, in the arms of her mother. The cruelty of the situation is intensified by the physical violence with which he hurt the baby, who did not only have to bear the pain of the wound, but also had to survive the cold – which she did not. This episode of violence and injustice went unpunished and one of the members involved, Miss Maude Furnivall, is still living happily in the mansion, despite the organ's playing. This implies that, in a way, the tragedy could happen again. In fact, the story features two instances of re-enactment of the events. The second attempt is the one which, performed by the spectres of the dead characters, completes the re-enactment as well as the cycle of revenge with Miss Furnivall's death. Nonetheless, it is the first instance which, despite failing with the Old Nurse's intervention, is more revealing of the mechanisms of horror and of children in ghost stories. I read Miss Rosamond as a *doppelgänger* of the baby ghost, an interpretation motivated by the fact that both characters are young girls of a similar age and are described in similar terms: "She was so pretty and so sweet" (Gaskell, 10). Besides, Miss Rosamond almost dies in the snow, just like the baby did. With this parallelism between characters in the past and characters

in the present, the story triggers the emergence of unresolved violent disputes among adults which may potentially harm innocent characters.

These instances of cruelty and inadequate behaviour are purposefully rendered invisible to the eyes of the unquestioning reader. LeFanu's story may not present a child in plain sight, but the handmaid mentions that the old judge hang himself with a rope and that

> it was his housekeeper's daughter owned the rope [...] and the child never throve after and used to be starting up out of her sleep and screeching in the night time, wid dhrames and frights that cum an her; and they said how it was the speerit of the ould Judge that was tormentin' her; and she used to be roaring and yelling out to hould back the big ould fellow with the crooked neck; and then she'd screech "Oh, the master! the master! he's stampin' at me, and beckoning to me! Mother, darling, don't let me go!" (34).

The girl is traumatised by the judge's suicide. Not only did he hang himself in the presence of the girl, as hinted by the quoted passage, but he also used her skipping rope. The judge's attempt to clear his own conscience is performed by using an object that is associated with the girl's innocence and playfulness. As a result of his decision to end his life, the girl had to suffer the haunting of a traumatic image which she endured till her death. However, I must point out that, taking into consideration Bann's claim (673) that revenants are entities with psyche and volition, there must be something beyond the obvious in the relationship between the old judge and the girl. The handmaid also reveals that "the poor little crathure was his own child; for he was by all accounts an ould villain every way" (LeFanu, 34). This exposes that the judge's tormenting of the girl was probably deliberate and intentional, since her existence was a threat to his status quo.

Yet the story which presents the most ambiguous relationship between adults, children and ghosts is "The Turn of the Screw", where the spectres are also accused of immoral behaviour. Every discussion around this narrative must face the difficult task of clarifying what is happening at Bly, whether the ghosts are real and whether the

Governess is protecting the children from unspeakable horrors or she is herself the threat to the children. Personally, I believe that the story is intentionally written ambiguously to generate different effects and interpretations on every reader, which is where the story gains its value. When the narrative mentions unspeakable horrors without detailing their exact nature, the reader is forced to fill in the gaps with their own idea of horror, which guarantees an unsettling approach on the part of every reader. Therefore, instead of siding with one interpretation or the other, I will comment on the effect of this ambiguity upon the passages relevant to the discussion.

Mrs Grose is the link between the past and the present and the one responsible for letting the reader know who Peter Quint and Miss Jessel were. Yet the first description of the former governess is given by the unnamed Governess. She explains that "the woman is a horror of horrors" and the passage reads that "Mrs Grose, at this, fixed her eyes a minute on the ground; then at last raising them, 'Tell me how you know,' she said. 'Then you admit it's what she was?' I cried." (James, 186). Even if Mrs Grose does not confirm it immediately, the Governess is able to prejudice our perception of Miss Jessel from the beginning. When the maid finally concedes that "they were both infamous" (187), we are not offered much insight as to why exactly, except that "he did what he wished [...] with them all" and that Miss Jessel left because " "she couldn't have stayed. Fancy it here—for a governess!" And afterwards I imagined—and I still imagine. And what I imagine is dreadful" (188). This allusion to a too liberal behaviour with servants and children alike, alongside the idea that whatever happened is unthinkable for a governess, hints at the possibility that the children were sexually abused. As if this was not unsettling enough, the story establishes parallelisms between Miss Jessel and the current Governess, which suggests that the situation has not changed. This can be seen when the Governess finds the ghost of Miss Jessel sitting at her table and standing there

> as my vile predecessor. Dishonoured and tragic, she was all before me; but even as I fixed and, for memory, secured it, the awful image passed away. [...] She had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers (James, 220).

The text never reveals explicitly that either the previous or the current governess ever abused the children. All we know is that their relationship or conduct with the children would not be socially acceptable. Of course, there is a chance that this interpretation is misguided by the focalisation in the Governess' perception of the horrors that Mrs Grose described to her, but even if we try to resist imagining the worst scenario, it is clear that these characters' influence over the children was deemed negative.

All this intergenerational cruelty and immoral conducts which threaten the increasingly protected space of childhood are central to the horror-inducing mechanisms of Victorian ghost stories. Readers learn that children are vulnerable to adult's instances of immoral conduct, which are usually repressed and unseen. This renders these abject accounts even more abhorrent because children are the victims, which generates a greater shock upon the reader. Child hauntings emphasize that the past is stuck in the present and the children bear the aftermath of a moral transgression, which makes adults realise and acknowledge their moral deviance. In fact, the haunting of children triggers a quest to disclose the truth and engages both past and present so that characters get an understanding of a situation they cannot explain. The fictional child resorts to empathy so that adults start exploring past events and the spectres that haunt them, something evident in Oliphant's story when Rolland cries to his father "Oh, think, papa, think, if it was me!" (127). Exploiting the construct of the vulnerable child is probably their only way to have their voice heard. Their discourse is mostly silent, and their accounts of ghost sightings are dismissed on the grounds that they are either false – as in Gaskell's story – or the symptom of a weak health – as in "The Open Door". Ghost stories are a literary space where this dynamic is undermined. Hawker's story can be read as a critique that

ignoring accounts of children, farfetched though they might be, can have terrible consequences. Dr Simson's scepticism is mocked when he is troubled by what he witnessed at the ruins in Oliphant's story. Hay also highlights that "we are meant to laugh at LeFanu's doctors and lawyers who think that their accounts offer anything substantive or even falsifiable" (96). Upper-class discourse is traditionally afforded more reliability, and children seem to be aware that, in the eyes of the adults, their account of events will not be trusted if they mention the supernatural experience. However, ghost stories shatter this conception and put the accounts of the upper-class or adults – as opposed to children's – at the same level of authority.

Haunted children, therefore, turn the spotlight on the way adults treat infants. Although ghost-seeing initially increases parental anxieties and concerns about the child's health, some stories prove that ghosts are not the real threat. A close reading of the stories reveals that adults may have other attitudes with far more concerning effects on children. These stories disclose instances of intergenerational violence and adult misconduct which are often silenced by history, and which may range from ritualistic infanticide to paedophilia or other forms of abuse. These stories exploit the conception of the child as a source of infinite goodness to emphasize the threat that the grotesque behaviour of some adults, which is here epitomised by ghosts and the supernatural, poses to the community. Furthermore, these stories question the authority granted to children's voices and undermine our perception of what we consider reliable.

2.2. Ghostly Children: Horror and Ambiguity

> 'Now that I had seen for myself this little moaning child, [...] I would stand it no longer'
> (Gaskell, 13)

Some ghost stories intensify the horror effect by depicting spectres of dead children or infants who behave in indecipherable and potentially dangerous ways. Depicted with ghostly attributes, these children are capable of frightening adults and strike them with awe as the story progressively sheds light into the past, which the reader has to discover. As Balanzategui claims, "childhood is positioned at the site of traumatic, imperfectly recalled pasts that haunt the adult's present in obfuscated ways" (12). Therefore, children are used as a plot device to unveil these traumatic or repressed past events and one must pay attention to the clues that the text drops about them. Some narratives are very upfront while some others let the reader do all the work. Ambiguity surrounds every aspect of this latter group of stories and the reader must devise an explanation that matches the details which the story has disclosed.

The stories which are more transparent in detailing the imperfect past which haunts the adult's present are those which feature the common trope of blood-thirsty, vengeful spectres. I already argued that, in "The Old Nurse's Story", Miss Rosamond's being vulnerable to the baby ghost haunting exemplifies that innocent children might be potential victims of intergenerational cruelty and unresolved disputes. However, the little girl is not her main victim. The baby ghost haunts Miss Furnivall and embodies her remorse for having disclosed her sister's situation, an event which culminated in her death, and for condoning her father's brutal display of violence and cruelty. Something similar can be observed in "Lost Hearts", where the ghosts – who, incidentally, are children too – seem to be threatening Stephen when, in fact, their main aim is to make Mr

Abney pay for his cruelty in sacrificing them and hiding the remnants of their bodies around his premises. Both stories portray a child who appears to the reader as the main victim of the haunting. However, it is later revealed that the actual victims of the haunting are the adults, who had either ignored their remorse or apologetically convinced themselves that they had sacrificed somebody for a greater good.

Another spectral child haunts the narrator in Oliphant's "The Open Door". Nevertheless, the narrative does not mention, at first sight, anything that hints at any wrong deed in his past. As I have argued before, Roland appeals to his father's sense of empathy so that he can disclose what happened in those ruins and how the ghost child can be helped. The narrator would have fled the place and taken his family elsewhere had it not been for the promise he made to his son. This is the reason which forces him to witness the eerie scene taking place every night at the ruins. Does this clarify whether the fact that the ghost is a child is significant to the story? I believe it does. The ghost's background story is that the young boy died "before the vacant doorway, which no one could either shut or open more" (Oliphant, 140). His only caregiver was his mum, who passed away "with [his] name on her lips" (153) and could not provide for Willie or perform her duty of nurturing the child. This profoundly shocks the narrator, who, as we read at the opening of the story, "was absent in London when these events began" (120). Rather than stirring the narrator's remorse for something he did in the past, this spectre triggers the emergence of the character's paternal anxiety of not being with his son. The ghost makes him imagine what could happen to Roland if he is absent and fails to provide the care he needs, which enables him to reflect on the way he is acting as a parent.

An arguably similar dynamic dominates the final parts of Henry James' story. The Governess seems to be haunted by her two protegees, who, despite not being dead ghosts, act like ones. The closing chapters turn what had initially been described as dazzling

loveliness into an unsettling evil. This perspective-shifting reaches its climactic point in chapter XVII, after Miles and the Governess have been conversing in his room. Throughout the passage, she asks questions to understand Miles' behaviour and while the boy's answers strike as ambiguous and cryptic to the Governess, and consequently to the reader too. When the tension of the scene is at its highest, with the Governess asking why he was expelled from school and promising to save him, we read the following:

> The answer [...] was instantaneous, but it came in the form of an extraordinary blast and chill, a *gust of frozen air*, and a *shake of the room* as great as if, in the wild wind, the casement had crashed in. The boy gave a *loud, high shriek*, which, lost in the rest of the shock of sound, might have seemed, [...] note either of *jubilation or of terror*. I jumped to my feet again and was conscious of darkness. So for a moment we remained, while I stared about me and saw that the drawn curtains were unstirred and the window tight. "Why, the candle's out!" I then cried.
> "It was I who blew it, dear!" said Miles. (James, 228; emphasis mine)

This passage depicts Miles with ghostly qualities. After showing that he is honest and reasonable, he laughs in a way that combines amusement and horror amid eerie wind gusts and the Governess' shock and disorientation. His honesty and loveliness have been rendered a source of horror – even of supernatural activity since the window is shut. This ghostly behaviour is culminated in his acknowledging that he was the one who caused all this chaos and confusion. The following day, he offers to play the piano for her, an episode which she describes as "a charming exhibition of tact, of magnanimity" (229), but which suddenly fills her with fear in realising that Flora has gone missing and interpreting that Miles has been distracting her from her care-giving duty, something which has relevant implications for the general grasping of the story. This all proves that, even though the children are not dead, they have supernatural qualities which afford them the narrative status of ghosts. She notes that "[Miles] had got out of me that there was something I was much afraid of" (218), which elucidates that the child has access to some information that she has not disclosed to us readers and that the child is planning on using it against her. In fact, the Governess is so scared that she even considers resigning the job in different

occasions. The children, with their new, incomprehensible, and threatening attitude prompt her realisation that she has somehow failed as a caregiver. Ceaselessly, the story does not make the reason explicit, and the reader must infer it from what they have speculated so far. If one is to believe that the ghosts at Bly are real, she has been distracted by the revenants and the nature of their relationship with the children. If, conversely, one believes that the Governess is a paedophile, her failure in providing the right care for the children is due to her repressed desire and the children's loveliness. Naturally, there are more possible interpretations, but they all question whether her role as a caregiver has been appropriate.

Ghostly children in these stories have had questionable caregivers. However, Kipling's "They" does not initially make us think that the narrator is capable of any harm or neglect to children. In fact, he appears to be fond of them and he even wants to attract their attention with the repairs of the car. Nevertheless, once he discovers that the children living in that mansion are ghosts, they fill him with abject horror. He even claims that he cannot go back to the Lady's mansion, but the reason is yet again to be inferred from other textual clues. Vision seems to be a prominent trope throughout the story. The Lady at the mansion is blind, and she is constantly insisting that he give her visual accounts of the surroundings, of the children or even of his dreams. This observation gains relevance when considering that the narrator seems to be the only one capable of seeing the children. Other characters can feel their presence or account for some of the narrator's actions on the grounds that these children inhabit the mansion. For the sake of illustration, Madden, the butler, concludes that the narrator's swerving aims at avoiding running over the children, but, as soon as he gets confirmation, he asks "did you 'appen to see them upstairs too?" (Kipling, 165). Apparently, he knows their habits and main characteristics, but

needs confirmation to check, perhaps, that the accounts he has received from the Lady are true.

Nothing makes us suspicious of the narrator's relationship with children until he says that, for him, living with spectral children "would be wrong. For me only..." (178). As readers, we must conclude that something about dead children cohabiting with the living would disturb him only. The very scarce research conducted around this story suggests that there is a strong autobiographical component in Kipling's narrator: his own daughter's death (McGivering, online). This is definitely a possibility which the text may hint at when the Lady mentions that "it's difficult to see faces in dreams. Some people can, but most of us haven't the gift [...] and they tell me that one never sees a dead person's face in the dream. Is that true?" (Kipling, 164). The narrator never sees the faces of the ghost-children. He can see their silhouettes and their backs – he may even feel their touch in the hand, yet he never sees their faces directly. Since he believes that one cannot see the faces of the dead in dreams, assuming that the same holds true for supernatural encounters would not be farfetched. The fact that he struggles to locate the mansion in his map also emphasizes this idea that the supernatural and dreams concur in places where the laws of physical reality are subverted. Therefore, the narrator decides to stay for as long as he can in the company of this lady and the ghosts who live with her. Yet he leaves with the intention of not returning lest he should see the spirit of his own child, whom we assume died – like Kipling's daughter Josephine –, something which would be devastating for him.

The wide variety of ways in which children are presented as ghosts or as having ghostly attitudes manifests that their presence in narratives is deliberate and that, as a plot device, they help us read the intricacies of these stories. Exploiting the cultural construct that children's behaviour is unpredictable and that they can alter the conventional power

dynamics of the narrative, ghostly children draw our attention to a traumatic past event which has not been acknowledged by characters. Their presence in the narratives make this tension between the present and the past emerge in different degrees of ambiguity. The most canonical stories present revenants that complete a cycle of revenge only made ambiguous by the fact that they seem to haunt someone who is innocent, and their intended victim is not disclosed until the end. Other stories, however, exploit the uncanniness of the child and suffuse the narrative with doubt and indecisiveness which somehow imitate the characters' insecurities and anxieties as caregivers. Characters like Roland's father and James' Governess realise that they are neglecting their responsibilities towards the children, which is something that they were either not aware of or that they simply do not dare admit. Nevertheless, these parental anxieties are sometimes closer to remorse for the care they could not provide. The spectral children in "They" probably remind the narrator of something very painful and which he has surely not gathered the courage to accept. Yet the unassertive tone of the story guarantees that only the blind woman, who can see beyond outward appearance, knows for sure. Thus, the stories teach us again that although we can infer so much, there can be no absolute certainty that we know the whole of the story.

3. Conclusions

The in-depth discussion provided in my TFG has allowed me to validate my initial thesis. The presence of children in ghost stories is deliberate and serves the purpose of intensifying the horror effect on the reader. Besides, they draw our attention to the adult's role as caregivers and make tensions emerge. The ghost story genre is the perfect space for these concerns to flourish because of its formal characteristics. They subvert Realist

norms in complex ways that prompt a dialectic relationship between the supernatural and the physical world. This intricate reading of reality draws heavily in paradoxical combinations of comfort with horror and of respectability with amoral conduct and imbues the stories with a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, only made more intense with their deliberate insistence on presenting facts with a degree of reliability which even questions the character's perceptions. Additionally, ghost hauntings act as a reminder that some horrific stories have been repressed or forgotten, or in some cases, the hauntings are usually revelatory of something that characters were either unaware of or simply dared not admit.

All studies about the representation of children in fiction comment on their ambiguity and ambivalence. Critics agree that this paradoxical representation is the result of a conception of the child as a cultural other. This constitutes the basis of their uncanniness, since they are constructed as opposing the adult while also being one of the same kind. Victorian England started seeing childhood as a protected space, which manifested that children were vulnerable members of the society in need of the adult's guidance and care. However, there was an important element of self-consciousness which questioned whether adults, corrupt and repressed as opposed to the children, were appropriate to fulfil this role. All this ambiguity was transferred into the cultural representation of the fictional child, who was portrayed both as a source of admirable loveliness and as a threatening entity which troubles the adult's conscience. When portrayed favourably, the narrative stresses that they are vulnerable and that their parents must protect and provide for them. When, conversely, they make the adults uneasy, the stories highlight their unpredictability and their capacity to reverse power in their favour. Another interesting characteristic of children that is of special importance in ghost stories is their playing with appearances and sightings. Some of the selected stories emphasize

that children have fun pretending they are missing, either because they play hide-and-seek or because they need to escape the adult's control. Lastly, the Ghost Story also exposes that adults may attempt to restrict knowledge to the children under the pretext of protecting them. However, the genre also discloses that the children may already know something, which causes a power imbalance.

Hauntings exploit the construction of vulnerability attributed to children and present them as victims of a spectre. They present physical and psychological symptoms that may even require the intervention of an expert. Ghost-seeing appears to cause commotion because we feel compassion for the child, who has been presented as vulnerable and defenceless. However, the unfolding of the narrative usually lays bare that it is not the spectres that constitute a danger for them, but the episodes of cruelty and inappropriate behaviour that some apparently respectable adults can display. The selected stories offer a wide variety of deviant conducts, ranging from infanticide and mistreatment to neglect and sexual abuse. Furthermore, these stories evince the lower degree of authority that was, and probably still is, afforded to children's discourse. Their accounts of events are often dismissed and their intentions unheard, a dynamic which ghost stories undermine.

The final feature which this research has identified is spectral children and living infants with ghostly attributes. They haunt the adult's present and force them to see something in their past which they had not acknowledged. The most salient examples of ghostly children fulfil the trope of vengeful spirits and claim the life of a character who behaved inadequately in the past. There are other cases where it is unclear why the haunted adult should feel remorse. It is only when we ask ourselves why this spectral behaviour should terrify them the way it does that we find the answer. They arise the characters' anxieties as caregivers and may also point out at their flaws in their role as

such. These are all consternations that, under normal circumstances and without the shock of the encounter with the supernatural, characters would have been too afraid to address by themselves.

In conclusion, fictional children are built upon a paradox exploited in ghost stories with all sorts of purposes in connecting past and present and intensify the horror effect on the reader. This is of utmost importance when considering a genre which saw its emergence in the increasingly literate lower-middle classes, and which had the mission of entertaining an audience. Furthermore, this research has established that ghosts and children were complex cultural constructs for the Victorian society and that some interesting parallelisms can be drawn between these two literary figures. They are both presented as the other and question whether a complete understanding of the story can be attained in ways which, much like the gothic genre, combine horror and admiration. While ghosts tend to raise doubts about perception and the boundaries of knowledge, children challenge power dynamics within the narrative and trigger the emergence of parental concerns about caregiving.

4. Further Research

In this TFG I have introduced some aspects that I could not fully develop within the scope of my research. An example of this is Smajic's discussion around the value of sight and vision. I believe that such an innovative approach can generate many interesting contributions to the issue of reliability and the dialectic relationship between formal conventions of Realism and the supernatural. This would be of special interest in deciding whether ghost stories accept the existence of a spiritual reality or they undermine it by proving that, should such thing exist, it must be beyond our understanding.

Further research is necessary in analysing the characteristic ambiguity of these texts. Considering the way critics have approached works like James' story, where their interpretations either align with the Governess' account or discredit it from the beginning, I believe that it would be interesting to comment on how these two interpretations coexist in the text and why it is that the text is deliberately ambiguous. Admittedly, this is no easy task because some interpretations become more apparent as you read them again. However, ambiguity clearly has a purpose and, as readers, we should devote some time to understanding its intricacies.

In addition, I hope that this paper encourages further exploration of some of the texts presented here. Not all of them are well-known and they certainly vary in degree of complexity, but some of these authors contributed greatly to giving Victorian England a body of popular Gothic culture. Therefore, I feel that we would acquire a better understanding of other great Victorian texts if we could imagine what their daily entertainment was like.

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